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North Korean Defector, Victim & Witness to Trafficking of North Korean Females including her own daughters in China

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In 1998, the economy in North Korea was deteriorating every day, and there was no exception for Moosan, where I lived.

The small amount of ration we had been given was no longer available, and people were wandering about in the mountains, fields, and farms to find anything to eat. The number of people dying of starvation increased daily, and dead bodies were abandoned for hours, covered with rags, before they were taken away off streets, stations and inside trains. Residential houses had not seen any lights due to the electricity shortage. The shift production system for factories was only in words, and the factories were practically closed. Workers were more occupied with collecting scrap iron so that they could exchange it for flour from China.

The mountains and fields were running out of grassroots for food. People had to walk miles to the farming areas to find food because the trains were no longer running. If it could be exchanged for food, people were willing to sell just about anything, whether it was personal valuable items, the necessities, or machine parts. Each day was an intense bruising battle. Fortunately, I worked at a noodle factory, and I was able to bring home some cereal for my three daughters and spare them from starving to death. In addition to working at my regular job, I worked on a farm and also tried to sell food from the farm. I was extremely busy all the time and could not afford the time to rest even when I got sick.

My three daughters also worked and helped out with the house work. In mid-June, my eldest daughter was given a one-week vacation from her work in order to find food.

She decided to go to China to make money. She had been told that if she worked for one week in China, she could make at least a few thousand Chinese Won.

I only found out about her plans just before she was getting ready to leave. My daughter had already made up her mind, and I had no excuse to convince her to stay. I could not tell her to stay and starve with me. I only hoped that she would come back safe after her work in China. After waiting anxiously for one week, I received a letter from my daughter.

She explained in the letter that she could not come back and asked for forgiveness for becoming a stumbling block in for the rest of the family. She asked me to consider it as if I never had her as a daughter, but if I could wait three years, she would return with money.

I could not lose my daughter just like that. She was everything in my life even through the difficult times.

Moreover, I knew I would not be able to endure the accusation, condemnation, and sneer for having a defector in the family. I was determined to keep the family together no matter what, and I decided to cross the Tumen River with my other two daughters risking our lives.

After I have made up my mind, I secretly burned our photo albums at night in a warehouse for the fear that our next door neighbor (a spy National Security and Safety Dept.) would find out. I stayed up all night writing a letter to my older sister and organizing our belongings. Easier said than done. Though we had been poor, leaving our hometown where we were born and raised and leaving our beloved brothers and sisters, not knowing when we would see each other again, was extremely difficult. I realized that it was not something I could have done if it was not for my daughter whom I loved. This is probably why many North Koreans are not able to leave their land no matter how difficult their lives are.

On June 25th at noon, we were on our way after taking a last look at our sweet home. After walking for about 70 miles, we arrived at a rural town near the bank of Tumen River. This entire experience was such a trauma for my youngest daughter, who was 18 at the time, that she experienced severe pain in her heart when we were climbing the mountain. She had to take the first aid medication our guide had brought and rest at times.

We had to hide out in the bush near the river and wait until the night. Then we started to cross the river. It was pitch-dark, and the sound of violent water gave us the creeps. We felt as if the whistle sounds of the border patrol and were afraid they were about to grab us on the back of our neck, so we walked faster and faster.

We held onto each other's hands through the strong current, and we safely cross the river. Soaking wet, we walked into the house I had been told that my oldest daughter was staying. After changing into dry clothes in a basket prepared for people who frequently cross the river, I asked them the whereabouts about my daughter, but they had already sent her to another place knowing that we were coming.

We had no choice but to follow their directions. We climbed up a ladder to an attic through a ventilation outlet in a warehouse for food. A bed of chaff, covered with a sheet of plastic and a blanket was being used as a mattress. We noticed hair pins and books on the floor and realized that we were not the first ones staying in that room.

Food was delivered using a ladder, and during the day, they took away the ladder so that we could not leave. We were able to look out to the street and clearly hear people talking on the street. We could not move around freely the room and could not make any sounds for the fear that someone outside would notice us.

On the third day, we were told that the Chinese police were conducting a search campaign. When it was dark, we went to a nearby mountain and spent the night in a shed. Around 2 AM, the owner [of the house] (He was a member of a trafficking ring that sells North Korean women to different places in downtown.) came and told us that a car was here to take us to downtown and he led us to the street.

The taxi was waiting for us with its lights turned off. Every 30 minutes, when the patrol cars passed by, we had to stop the car and hide out in a ditch. After about three hours, we arrived at our last meeting point.

We were told that from this point on we had to walk on a mountain trail for about three hours. We were also told that since it was a dangerous area, if we ran into anyone on the way we should throw a rock at the person and run. Since we might not be able to find rocks on the way, we were told to find 5-6 rocks as big as a fist and take them along.

The husband and wife who took us in the taxi (they were the younger sister of the owner of the house and her husband) drove off in an empty taxi and the owner and our family started walking on the mountain trail. We walked by potato fields and ginseng fields and climbed over the ridges. We walked over three hours with sweaty palms, anxious that someone might see us. Finally we began to see a street and met up with the taxi. The driver was pretending as if he was fixing the car. We got on the taxi and drove into Hwaryong city.

They tried to separate us by saying that if we all get into one car we might be stopped for an inspection. So my two daughters got on the taxi and left first and I was left with the owner. We were supposed to take a bus into downtown. After my daughters left, the owner started suggesting that I stay there instead of going to downtown which was more dangerous. He said that he would let me know the whereabouts of my daughters. I knew what he was trying to do. I thought to myself that nothing would be gained by getting into an argument with him, so I tried to persuade him. I begged him that if he could take me to Yenji, I would see my daughters off and then do whatever he wanted me to do.

After two hours, I was able to go to where my daughters had been sent to. Some other trafficking ring members were already there and I noticed my daughters were crying because I did not arrive for a while. When my daughters saw me they held my hands and would not let go. I could not imagine what would have happened if I was not able to see them again.

The traffickers negotiated in Chinese so that we could not understand. We had a feeling that we might be separated again. One of the daughters suggested to the traffickers that if it is difficult for all three of us to stay together, at least one of the daughters should go with me and that otherwise we would not move one step.

One woman who was insisting that she wanted to take the daughters with her stepped out to make a phone call. When she returned, she promised to do as we asked and pay. The daughters I treasured were being sold off like slaves in front of my own eyes, but

there was nothing I could do. I had to comfort myself thinking that it was better this way since it was safer. It was the only choice I had as a “fugitive.”

The feeling of relief, however, lasted only for a moment. They had lied to us knowing that we did not understand Chinese. They put us into two separate taxis and when the cars started going separate ways in the middle of downtown. The car with my daughters went to Heilong Jiang, and the car I was in drove off to some other place.

The mother and daughters were banging on the window and struggling to get out, but they blocked the car window and cursed at us. They did not allow us to look out the window and did not even allow us to cry. I had come to China to find one daughter but ended up losing the other two daughters in the broad day light. There were no words to express my devastation, hurt, and frustration. I wanted to kill myself, but I could not die before I had to find my daughters. Each day I waited to hear anything about my daughters with an anxious heart. My hair turn all white and eyes were so swollen that I could not even recognize myself.

One week after, my oldest daughter showed up at where I was staying. It was as if I was dreaming.

In a small apartment in Yenji we cried and cried holding each other but not able to cry out loud. My daughter blamed herself for what happened to the rest of the family. She had run away from the people who had bought her, risking her life, because she wanted go back home. She went back to the house where she had been sold off and heard there that the rest of her family had come to find her and been sold off. She begged them to send her to Yenji and found her way to where I was staying. We stayed all night talking, and she told me all about what she had gone through.

She wanted to make money and help out, but because she was sent away too far, she was not sure if she could ever go back home being so far away, so she decided to run away. She was glad that her running way led her to finding me.

I was somewhat relieved having found my oldest daughter whom I thought I would never see again. After a few days, the traffickers came looking for me because my other daughters were insisting that they bring me over. They told us that in Heilong Jiang, where my second and third daughters were sold off, there were a lot of old bachelors and they wanted me to bring my oldest daughter along with me.

They drafted up a modern version of slavery document saying that because my oldest is bringing along her mother, she would be sold for 500 Chinese Won less. The owner who had been “taking care of” our family did not object after seeing me devastated and torn when we became separated.

Our family was finally reunited after indescribable pain and hardship.

Later I heard that it was a result of my second daughter trying hard to bring me over. Her “husband” was well aware that he did not deserve a wife like her. So he was always watching her for the fear that she would run away from her. My daughter told him one day that “no matter how hard you try to keep me here, I will have to run away. I cannot live here knowing that my mother is waiting for me. So if you want to continue to live with me, you would better go find and bring my mother.”

Against his own will my second daughter’s husband found out the number for the traffickers. They told him that for 1,000 Chinese Won, they would bring me. He had to borrow money to pay them 1,000 Chinese Won, and that was how the woman came looking for me.

I cannot begin to describe all the evil deeds of the traffickers, who were not afraid to separate a mother and her children, sell a parent to the children, and willing to do just about anything for money.

Most North Korean women in China are trafficked and sold off to forced marriages with men who have mental or physical disabilities or are extremely poor and cannot afford to get married.

My daughters also had to work from dawn to dusk, and it broke my heart to watch them. Moreover, there were random inspections by the police, and we never had a day with peace of mind. Fortunately, the neighbors warned us beforehand and we were able to avoid being caught. If we were caught, however, we would have had to pay several hundred Chinese Won to several thousand Chinese Won in fines.

What sustained us through the dark times, when we could not tell what the future held for us, was the news from South Korea we heard through KBS radio programs. Especially, we learned a lot about North Korea that we did not know and also realized that we had wrong information about North Korea. We also learned a lot about South Korea and America. After learning about the lives of North Korean defectors in South Korea, we tried to figure out how we would also be able to go to South Korea.

I began to think that I could not let my children continue to live in China. I wanted them to live in South Korea where they would not have to hide all the time and where they would be able to sing Korean songs as much as they wanted. This became my most important desires.

In summer 2002, after four years of being in China, the Chinese police had tightened their control over North Korean refugees, and many North Koreans were being repatriated. We were seeing the limits of what it was like constantly having to hide. Not only the North Koreans, but also the Korean-Chinese who were living with the North Koreans, would be arrested if caught by the police, and we could not delay any longer. We secretly prepared to leave and began our second adventure toward the South Korean consulate office in Beijing. However we could not help but to hesitate when we arrived at the consulate office building in Beijing. There were two police vehicles permanently

stationed in front of the building. In addition, there were two armed policemen guarding the gate and two more armed policemen guarding the building entrance.

We circled around the consulate office for two days and considered our options. On the third day around noon, we held fake document envelopes in our hands and walked straight through the gate. We walked in openly with an attitude that we were supposed to be there. The policemen at the gate looked at us but did nothing. I was inside the gate when the girls got into a physical struggle with the guards at the building entrance. We pushed our way into the building, and realized that the oldest and the youngest were caught by the police and fighting to get away. My second daughter and I went outside the building to try to pull police away from the girls as we screamed. The four women were yelling and screaming, a desk was turned over and clothes were torn, but all four of us were able to make it into the building.

Everything happened so fast. The police put on the siren and round up the people around the building and started interrogating them in police vehicles, but it was already after we had stepped into the territory of South Korea that we had been dreaming about.

We found the freedom for which we were willing to risk our lives, and all four of us living happily in Seoul.

It has not been easy settling in South Korea coming from a system that has been separate and different for over 50 years, but I am only thankful for the fact that we are now legitimately South Korean citizens when we had once been in hiding with no freedom. My oldest daughter now has a husband and a son, and she work for a company. My second and the youngest are in the process of realizing their dreams as singers singing as much as they have always wanted to. My beloved two girls won the first prize for three weeks in a row on KBS' Saturday Family Singing Contest.

All four of us sincerely hope that other defectors do not have to go through the misery we experienced day after day in China.

Moreover, we bow our heads to everyone who considers the pains of North Koreans as their own and are ever so generous with their attention and efforts for North Koreans who suffer numerous human rights violations.